



# CASE STUDY

PebblePad at ECU: A symphony in three movements

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PEBBLEPAD CASE STUDIES

**STORIES OF INNOVATION TOLD BY THOSE CHARTING NEW COURSES IN LEARNING, TEACHING AND ASSESSMENT.**

## **ABSTRACT**

At Edith Cowan University (ECU) PebblePad is used as an integrative learning teaching tool, designed to support students' learning and ability to articulate this learning to others from first year to graduation and beyond. In this case study, we will discuss how ECU has continued to support program-long, program-wide PebblePad use in multiple Schools via a central unit.

## OVERTURE

ECU is in Perth, Western Australia. Formed in 1991, ECU is a young university which, being an amalgamation of teaching colleges before its inception, prides itself on its teaching excellence (Universities Australia, 2020). Its stated purpose is to “transform lives and enrich society through education and research” (ECU, 2016). Senior management has long supported teaching and learning at the university and in 2010 the university started to investigate the use of eportfolios as a way to support all students to be able to articulate their learning and achievements on graduation (Strampel, 2014). PebblePad was selected as the eportfolio platform and was introduced at ECU in 2012 as an enterprise system. It was the aim that all students would have access to using the system and that staff members would be supported in integrating PebblePad into their units from 2013 (ECU, 2012).

## SONATA (BRISK AND LIVELY): 2012-2015

In 2012, a team in the Centre for Learning and Development (CLD) (now Centre for Learning and Teaching [CLT]) was charged with providing support for academic staff members in implementing PebblePad V3 in their units. Units piloting PebblePad were in speech pathology, business, arts and humanity, engineering and education. At this stage of implementation, PebblePad was used in a wide number of ways within these units, based on the needs of the users, unit outcomes, and assessment tasks. Students were introduced to PebblePad from the perspective of how they could elect to use PebblePad to support their future employment. This approach aligned to contemporary understanding of portfolio thinking of the time, as process (or “shoebox”) and product (or showcase) (Barrett, 2011; Miller, 2014).

Alongside implementing PebblePad in units, the CLD encouraged innovative use of PebblePad by staff and students at ECU. This included an ePortfolio Competition in 2012, the PebblePad Mini Conference in 2013, ePortfolios: Peer facilitated workshops (PebblePad community started at ECU) from 2014, and by hosting the Australasian ePortfolio Forum in 2015. Following the initial semester, staff members trialling PebblePad noted that the system was particularly useful to support employability. A number of staff members suggested that to make the best use of the system, it should be integrated throughout a whole course of study. In line with good practice models, early adopters commented that they appreciated the technical and at-the-elbow support that was provided to them (McAllister & Hauville, 2017).

While reflections were incorporated into the process of portfolio building, clear explanations of what was expected in a reflection was not. A result of this was that reflections tended to be more descriptive than critical (Barrett, 2011; Miller, 2014; Rassau, Arulampalam, Wexler, & Pate, 2014). Similarly, artefacts were attached to workbooks without consideration of how they demonstrated competencies, achievements or skills. An area of portfolio use that clearly required further attention was to ensure reflections and artefacts were meaningful to the individual and demonstrated development.

## **ANDANTE (SLOW AND LYRICAL): 2016-2017**

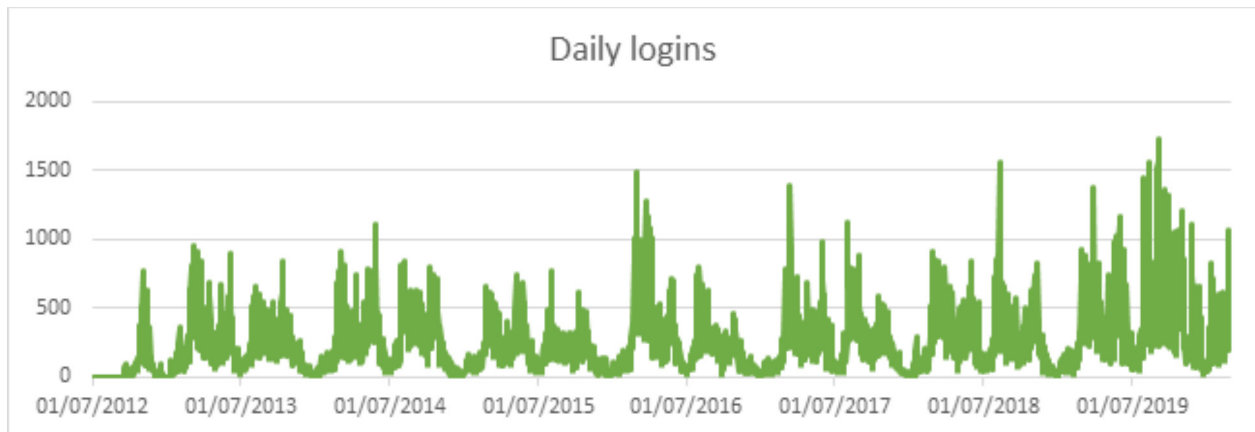
In 2016, ECU produced a Graduate Employment Strategy, reiterating ECU's commitment to all students having a portfolio (ECU, 2016). This strategy used integrative learning as its framework. This framework centralises reflective learning and looks for ways to support students to make connections between learning, working and life knowledge and experience (Peet, Lonn, Gurin, Boyer, Matney, Marra, Himbeault Taylor, & Daley, 2011). Portfolio use was central to this approach, with students given explicit opportunities to draw out their skills and points of difference through the use of stories.

As noted by Shepherd and Skrabut (2011), providing a narrow selection of resources helps manage technical use. At the same time, in line with the integrative learning framework and as noted in good portfolio practice (McAllister & Hauville, 2017), staff members were encouraged to use PebblePad course-long and course-wide workbooks or portfolios rather than in individual units. This allowed more controlled, centralised support to be provided on limited types of PebblePad resources. Limiting the types of PebblePad resources being utilised meant that ATLAS workspaces could also be set up in consistent ways. This helped avoid user error and ensured support was easier to provide. Tip sheets and help materials fed into the set-up options provided to staff members.

To provide staff members with a method of support that ran from first year to their final year, the gradCAP (Graduate Course Action Plan) workbook and portfolio was produced. Created within the CLT in collaboration with academic staff members and Careers staff members, the gradCAP workbook and portfolio is a generic workbook designed to be adapted to the needs of specific courses and disciplines studied in the university. The gradCAP workbook is designed to run throughout the course, with touchpoint units where students are required to interact with the workbook, opportunities to engage with Careers workshops, and options for students to interact with the workbook themselves at any time. The gradCAP links skill development with course and profession requirements and provides students with opportunities to provide concrete examples of these. Touch point units were encouraged throughout the course to ensure that all students had opportunities to work on their workbook in class. In 2016, PebblePad V5 was released. Focus groups were run with staff and students to determine ease of use and to check what support would need to be in place. Unit coordinators trialling V5 gave feedback that was shared back to PebblePad. At the same time, the PebblePad WA User Group was established with the inaugural meeting at ECU. This user group allowed users of PebblePad to showcase good practice in V5, and to offer peer support. ECU's focus in this period was supporting staff members in becoming expert users and producers of PebblePad resources. The increased uptake of PebblePad from 2016 can be seen in Figure 1.

Frequently in portfolio use, as in many learning technologies, it is the early adopters who trial the system and will become highly capable in using the technology. However, expanding technology use past this stage is frequently difficult, and often the technology use will halt at this stage (Reynolds & Pirie, 2016). At the same time, without being course-wide, the purposefulness of portfolios is questionable. Course-long, course-wide portfolios that are reasonably easy to implement by staff members became crucial at this point in ECU's use of PebblePad. To ensure long-term use over the life of a course, it was vital moving forward that new staff members be brought on board.





**Figure 1:** Daily logins - ECU PebblePad use

## CON MOTO (WITH SPIRIT): 2018-2020

Increasingly, courses using PebblePad at ECU have requirements from industry regarding demonstrating and evidencing capabilities. This has led to PebblePad becoming an expected element of the student experience in many courses in the university and has required additional staff members to incorporate PebblePad in their units. Courses requiring or encouraging portfolio use include engineering, nursing and midwifery, teaching, and paramedicine (Engineers Australia, n.d.; Nursing and Midwifery Board, 2020; Australian Institute for Teaching and School Leadership [AITSL], 2017). Over the last year it has become evident that the frequency of PebblePad use has increased (Figure 1). Given it is generally the same courses that have been implementing PebblePad for several years, this growth reflects more intense usage of course-long workbooks within these courses. From this, we can see that our approach of supporting whole of course workbooks has been effective. Newer additions to workbooks include practicum implementation, as well as a range of work samples from within coursework units. It is expected that through ongoing interaction with their course-long, course-wide workbook or portfolio, students themselves should notice examples of their own skill development and evidence of experience as they progress towards graduation (Strampel & Lewis, 2016). This progression can be supported through staff members making explicit links between coursework and professional requirements (Strampel & Lewis, 2016).

Over the past year, a number of courses have been looking at using PebblePad for the first time. Reasons for this include accreditation requirements, career development learning implementation, and to incorporate integrative learning at the course level to help students better understand their student journey. With staff members becoming increasingly comfortable in using PebblePad in their units, the university is in a position now where academic staff members can be supported to build new and innovative ways to support integrative learning of students throughout the life of their course.

## CODA

PebblePad at ECU is now in its ninth year. In this time, support has been managed through upskilling individual users, and through normalising the PebblePad experience with additional staff members who can offer support. The majority of courses that incorporate PebblePad have been doing so for some time. However, with new courses coming on board, now is an opportunity for innovative growth. Career development learning, closer connections with Careers and Volunteering, and additional input from industry can help ensure ECU is supporting staff members to provide course long, course wide opportunities for student learning. Revitalising staff involvement through a community of practice and grant and award applications, and encouraging student success through competitions will be a focus in our future development in PebblePad.

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There are an awful lot of things that make PebblePad unique. Not least the fact that it's a platform designed by educators for educators. Indeed, the PebblePad team is bursting to the seams with innovators and practitioners, all of whom learnt their craft in teaching roles. If you want to talk to a team who really understands your world, get in touch.

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